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ABSTRACT

A work-study program was designed to provide black inner-city youths with instruction and guidance in skills needed in their current jobs, especially their ability to speak standard English. The program used the technique of modeling to arouse students' motivation to adopt standard spoken English. Research has shown that the use of a model will be more effective if the students perceive the model to be like themselves, if the model has had personal success with the behavior and possesses status and competence, and if the students can see several models using the desired behavior. Therefore, the initial model chosen for this program was a black female teacher who explained the differences between black and standard English and when each was appropriate to use. The students' problem areas were the substitution of "d" for "th," speaking too rapidly, and speech that was mumbled and unclear. Drills included practicing pronunciation in pairs and groups and with a tape recorder. Students were instructed to listen carefully to the speech of black teachers and other influential blacks, including speakers invited to the class. Students were then asked to give a talk about themselves. There was a marked improvement in the students' speech and self-assurance, and the employers noticed their efforts to speak more clearly. (HTH)

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HELPING BLACK YOUTHS TO SPEAK STANDARD ENGLISH

by

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HELPING BLACK YOUTHS TO SPEAK STANDARD ENGLISH

I had a unique experience this past summer. I had the opportunity, along with three other instructors, to work directly with twenty-five Black inner-city high school youths in a work-study program. The program was unique in that all of the youngsters were above average students despite the fact that the vast majority of them were from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another unique aspect of the program was that the students, who attended class in the mornings, were all employed in the afternoons by private corporations and held responsible, challenging jobs. They were employed as telephone operators, receptionists, typists, file clerks, salespersons, library assistants, laboratory assistants, and other positions that put them in contact with the public. They were employed by law firms, banks, hospitals, newspaper offices, department stores, and other private, civic-minded firms.

The purpose of the morning classes was to provide the students with instruction, assistance, and guidance in job-related skills. The selection of the skills to be worked on was based on three factors: (1) what the students perceived they needed, (2) the instructors' assessment of the students' academic needs, and (3) the employers' perception of what the students needed in order to work efficiently.

The most persistent and continuous complaint made by the employers was that the students needed to improve their ability to speak standard English. There has been a continuing controversy about the use of "Black English" by Black children.

Despite the ethical and moral values that are inherent in the controversy, the fact is clear. If the students are to be employed in responsible positions, they must speak standard English. The public expects it, and the employers demand it. And, apparently, it is the responsibility of the teacher to deliver it.

If one has ever taught Black students, one recognizes the fact that many of them know all of the rules of standard English and have excellent writing skills. The problem is that they often do not transfer the knowledge and skills to the spoken word. They seemed unaware that this was happening.

While working with the students this summer and pondering the problem, the thought occurred that a very direct approach might be effective. Apparently it was necessary for the students to understand why it was so important for them to speak standard English and then to recognize when they did not.

An effective direct teaching technique is modeling. In modeling theory, appropriate behavior can be induced by assisting or introducing the students to a new form of behavior and by showing them how to do it. In order to be effective, modeling requires that the students not only acquire the new behavior but also perform it.

Bronfenbrenner (1970) made a distinction between ignorance of the appropriate behavior and a lack of motivation to perform the behavior. If the students know the appropriate behavior but do not perform it, then the problem is often one of motivation. Therefore, in order to get the students to improve their use of standard English, the model must arouse their interest and show them that the new behavior can be personally rewarding.

Bronfenbrenner (1970) indicated that one of the most important factors affecting the modeling process is the characteristics of the model. He identified several properties of the model that affect the process. Following are four that are applicable to this situation:

(1) The power of the model will increase if the students perceive the model to be like themselves.

(2) Performance of the desired behavior is more likely if the students see that the model has had personal success with the behavior.

(3) The model will be more effective if the students perceive the model to be someone who possesses competence and status.

(4) The effect will be stronger if the students can see several models using the desired behavior.

Modeling was chosen as the approach along with drill and practice.

As a Black woman who holds a responsible position and who speaks both standard and "Black" English - depending on the situation, I decided to use myself as an initial model with the students. As a means of motivation, I told the students that we needed to discuss something of great importance. I praised them on their performances on the jobs. Then I told them about the one major complaint we had been receiving from the employers. I then talked with them about the differences between standard and non-standard English and explained that standard English appeared to be more acceptable at school and on the job, while non-standard appeared to be more acceptable at home and with friends.

In order to get the students to identify with me, as a model I told them about myself - my childhood, my high school days, my educational background, and my work experiences, including my present position. I explained to them that when I was teaching students or talking with my colleagues, I always used standard English because this is what is expected. However, when I was at home with my family or conversing with my friends, I often used "Black English" because it is a comfortable, expressive way of speaking and my family and friends understood it. I gave some examples, which elicited laughter, smiles, and murmurs of approval. I told them that it was important to know when to use each form of English and to be able to switch back and forth as needed. I told them that with concentration and practice, they could do the same thing.

The instructors had given the students an informal speech inventory and had noted that the most common speaking problem areas were (a) the substitution of the sound of "d" for the sound of "th": dis for this, dat for that, de for the, dem for them, and so on; (b) speaking too rapidly with a rush of words that were often indistinguishable; and c) speech that was mumbled and unclear. There were other speaking problems, but pronunciation, enunciation, and pacing were the most common ones for the group and were the ones we decided to concentrate on during the brief period of the program.

Many activities were planned and conducted that would help the students to improve their speaking in the three problem areas. In retrospect the activities can be grouped as follows:

(1) In order to improve the correct use of initial consonants, a list was made of the "d for th" words. The model spoke each word slowly and distinctly and asked the students to repeat it. This was done several times with each word. Then the students were directed to pair themselves off and to practice saying the words with a partner. Then they were instructed to take the list of words home and to practice saying them in front of a mirror. At another class session, tape recorders were provided, and each student taped himself saying the words and listened to the playback. These activities served two purposes: one was that they provided an opportunity to practice the correct pronunciations of the words and the other was that they helped raise to the conscious level of the students the times when they did or did not use a word correctly.

(2) In order to improve the enunciation and pacing of speech, the students were divided into small groups to work with an instructor. Each student was tape recorded as he responded informally to a list of prepared questions, i.e., "Where do you work? What is your job? What do you like best about it?" and so forth. The tape was played back, and the students critiqued each other's speech. Were the responses clear and distinct? Were they spoken too fast? Could all of the responses be understood? Did the person use "th" instead of "d"? At another session, the model selected several sentences from the tapes and demonstrated the correct pacing of the sentences. Then the students were given a list of sentences and asked to practice them at home. Once

again, the students were taped during informal discussions about their jobs. During the critiquing, improvements were noted and praised, and suggestions were given for continued improvement.

(3) Along with the modeling, practice, and drill, the students were given numerous opportunities to speak in class. In pairs, they were responsible for reporting the news each day to the large group and conducting a question and answer period afterwards. They read weekly news magazines and were responsible for selecting an article and reporting on it orally once a week before a small group. They were also given several opportunities to talk about themselves. They made lists of their personal attributes and discussed them with small groups. They made collages which represented their feelings and aspirations and explained them to the large group. They also made fanciful, creative representations of their names and shared these with the large group. After awhile, the evaluating and critiquing of speech by peers and teachers became a routine activity. The result was not only improved speech but also improved self-concepts.

(4) Bronfenbrenner (1970) had said that it was important for students to see several models using the desired behavior. Therefore an effort was made to expose the students to other Black speakers. First of all, the students were instructed to listen to the speech of all of the Black teachers and of any other Blacks whom they felt were influential. They were told to pay particular attention to enunciation, pronunciation, and pacing. Next a young, successful Black lawyer was invited to speak to the whole

group about new laws which effect young people. The students were told to listen to not only the content of the speech but also the manner of delivery. The same instructions were given for the viewing of a video-tape of the Reverend Jesse Jackson delivering his "I Am Somebody" speech. The students responded well to these models and were able to discuss their speaking styles.

As a culminating activity, during the last week of the program, each student was asked to prepare a formal ten-minute oral presentation about his/her job. Each presentation was video-taped. This gave the students an opportunity to both hear and see themselves speaking. The students and the instructors alike agreed that there was a marked improvement in the students' speech and self-assurance. A few of the employers reported that they noticed that the students were making a conscious effort to speak clearly and distinctly. These comments supported our belief that we had created, without prior planning, a successful, short-term speech improvement program.

For next summer we plan to present a more systematic program which will include the following activities:

(1) An initial video-tape of each student delivering a ten-minute talk about himself.

(2) A report from employers about the exact nature of the speech problems they detect.

(3) A more individualized plan for improvement for each student.

(4) The use of an instructor as a speech model.

(5) Drill and practice on speech problems.

(6) The use of several other models.

(7) Many opportunities for students to speak to small and large groups.

(8) A report from employers about the progress the students have made.

(9) A final video-tape of each student delivering a ten-minute talk about the job.

It is apparent that employers expect their new employees to speak standard English while on the job. Teachers have to assume the responsibility of helping young people to attain this important job requirement. Modeling, practice, and drill are effective methods of instruction for speech improvement. The program discussed here can be used by other educators who are interested in improving the speech of Black youths.

References

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